

## **PUBLIC COMMENT FROM SONYA LAWRENCE 10/8/2014**

Thank for providing to me another opportunity to identify challenges that must be addressed on behalf of Delaware's students who are blind or visually impaired. Although there are a number of issues upon which this Task Force may focus, I call your attention to one very important matter: the need to establish best practices with respect to identifying, obtaining, and implementing appropriate forms of Assistive Technology for blind and visually impaired students.

Assistive Technology is rapidly advancing. Students who are blind or visually impaired are poised to benefit greatly from these technological advances if educators and school administrators are properly trained to understand these opportunities and are provided with appropriate support to identify, obtain, and implement these effective educational tools.

Today, a blind or visually impaired student may effectively access curriculum materials and receive simultaneous feedback from educators by linking their braille devices to IPADs or PCs. They may gain new access to video presentations and pictures through built-in video description tools imbedded in IOS 8 software. Students may participate in classroom discussions and present their mathematical computations to their classmates utilizing a whiteboard in the front of their classroom or via a connection to computer screens that are linked to the student's IOS device. Amazingly, blind and visually impaired students now have opportunities to "show their work on the board" in the same manner as their sighted peers. They can collaborate with their sighted peers in group settings where their Braille writing can immediately be converted into text for use and review by their sighted peers and educators.

Rather than attempt to manage unwieldy braille textbooks that sometimes have 4-10 volumes for one classroom textbook, the student can now, through an effectively organized partnership with Delaware's AIM Center and the Materials Management Center of the Division for the Visually Impaired, access his or her textbooks electronically. Visually Impaired students can utilize a PC or IOS device to read their course materials using proper text enlargement, contrast, format, and voiceover features that enhance their ability to effectively access course materials through use of their primary learning channels.

These technological advances provide a chance for increased success for many blind and visually impaired students. In Philadelphia, Boston, and Maryland, blind and visually impaired students are using assistive technology as the sole means through which to access educational materials. Students download materials, listen to their course materials and teacher-led discussions, print directly to their instructor's PC or IOS-driven device, and utilize GPS software to independently travel to school and throughout their educational environments. In Delaware, however, the resources for obtaining, implementing, and effectively utilizing Assistive Technology for all blind and visually impaired students are extremely scarce. Although certain local education agencies may be fortunate enough to employ Assistive Technology Specialists, these individuals often lack the expertise and experience to provide support to blind and visually impaired students.

Similarly, Delaware's Division for the Visually Impaired employs one or two individuals with specialized knowledge in the use and implementation of Assistive Technology for persons who are blind or visually impaired. Unfortunately, these individuals are not designated as the primary providers of Assistive Technology for blind and visually impaired students in Delaware. Even if these individuals were charged with providing services to support students, the limited FTEs allotted to DVI for AT services is woefully inadequate to meet the needs of every blind and visually impaired student in the state.

There are many evidence-based studies that focus upon the educational benefits that use of assistive technology brings to students with certain disabilities. This phenomena is well-documented in the blind and visually impaired community. If you survey the IEP teams in this state who are responsible for providing to blind and visually impaired students appropriate recommendations for accommodations and educational tools to ensure FAPE, I am sure that you will find that less than 10% of Delaware's students who are blind and visually impaired are taking full advantage of Assistive Technology options that would serve to enhance significantly their educational experiences.

This Task Force has an opportunity to radically change the manner in which blind and visually impaired students are educated in this State. I urge you to make recommendations to ensure that:

1. Each qualified blind and visually impaired student educated in the State of Delaware receives, on at least an annual basis, an Assistive Technology Assessment conducted by a qualified professional with experience in the area of AT for blind and visually impaired students;
2. Each IEP team charged with ensuring that blind and visually impaired students in the state receive FAPE undergo at least one training session per school year that will facilitate a working understanding of the use of AT in classroom, home, and other educational settings to ensure that opportunities for appropriate use of AT for each student receives appropriate consideration and action;
3. The Division of the Visually Impaired and the Delaware AIM center maintain an effective, transparent, and accessible program to ensure that students who are blind and visually impaired maintain barrier-free access to instructional materials designed to facilitate receipt of appropriate learning materials in a timely and effective manner. Each LEA serving blind and visually impaired students should also be required to undergo appropriate annual training sessions related to the means through which such materials may be obtained for blind and visually impaired students; and
4. The Delaware Department of Education and/or the Delaware Division for the Visually Impaired maintains a program through which current AT Specialists in LEAs receive, on at least an annual basis, education and training on the identification and implementation of appropriate AT for blind and visually impaired students. In addition, each Teacher for the Visually Impaired, Orientation and Mobility Specialist, and other related-service providers working in the state of Delaware should be required to undergo training, at least annually, focused upon identification, implementation, and evaluation of AT for use by blind and visually impaired students in the educational and home settings.

Blind and Visually Impaired students face a multitude of barriers in educational settings. Use of AT is a well-documented means through which to remove some of the most significant barriers these students face during the course of their preschool, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary school years. Students who are blind and visually impaired are expected to independently access the school curriculum, navigate the corridors of the school building and its community, forge relationships with students through collaborative work, and satisfy Expanded Core Curriculum requirements with limited intervention from Teachers for the Visually Impaired who are currently carrying caseloads that exceed 31 students per teacher across the state. I am not aware of longitudinal studies that have examined the correlation between educational experiences and employment outcomes for blind and visually impaired persons who were educated in the State of Delaware, but the low employment rates for blind and visually impaired persons in our state certainly suggests that we should take immediate steps to take advantage of all opportunities to improve these statistics.

This IEP Task Force can positively impact the lives of Delaware's blind and visually impaired community right now. I urge you to include in the recommendations presented to Delaware's legislature, specific items related to the education of blind and visually impaired students. Please provide these students with hope for a brighter future and skills that can ensure that they may become productive, engaged members of the Delaware community.

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver these comments today.

Kindest regards,

Sonya Fair Lawrence

Parent of a Seven Year Old Visually Impaired Student attending Thurgood Marshall Elementary School